



# JOINT NEWS RELEASE



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## **Unusual Mortality Event closes for Pacific walruses due to lack of new cases** *Investigation remains open for Alaskan ice seals*

The [Working Group on Marine Mammal Unusual Mortality Events](#) made the determination late last week that Pacific walruses will be removed from the list of animals currently being affected by a disease that has impacted several seal species across the North Slope and Bering Strait regions of Alaska since 2011. The Northern [Pinniped](#) Unusual Mortality Event (UME) will remain open for ice seals (ringed seals, ribbon seals, bearded seals and spotted seals)—based on continued reports of ice seals with disease symptoms from the Bering Strait region of Alaska. Monitoring for signs of the still unknown disease in Pacific walruses will continue through existing biological monitoring programs in Alaska.



**A healthy walrus and her calf (USFWS).**

Beginning in July 2011, elevated numbers of sick or dead ice seals were reported across the North Slope and Bering Strait regions of Alaska. Most affected seals had skin lesions and patchy hair loss. Some also exhibited lethargy and labored breathing. In September, 2011, several walrus carcasses with unusual skin lesions were also reported at a walrus haulout site on the Chukchi Sea coast of Alaska near the community of Point Lay.

By December 2011, an [Unusual Mortality Event](#) for northern pinniped species was [declared](#). An investigative team of national and international specialists from numerous agencies, laboratories, and institutions; which included Tribal leaders, hunters, scientists, veterinarians, wildlife biologists, and disease diagnosticians, was formed to investigate the underlying cause(s) of the disease syndrome affecting northern pinniped species.

Despite extensive analytical investigations on tissue samples from affected animals, no known or new infectious viral or bacterial agents, harmful algae toxins, or industrial contaminants have been identified that can explain the observed skin lesions and other symptoms in ice seals or walruses.

Although the cause of the skin lesions observed at the walrus haulout in 2011 remains unknown, surveillance efforts in 2012 and 2013 found very few new walrus cases, suggesting that the conditions contributing to elevated levels of skin lesions in walruses are no longer present. A recent request to remove walruses from the UME declaration has been approved by the Working Group on Marine Mammal Unusual Mortality Events.

The public is encouraged to report sightings of dead or stranded marine mammals in Alaska to the Alaska Marine Mammal Stranding Hotline at 1-877-925-7773; or to local wildlife authorities at the following numbers:

**North Slope Borough:**

North Slope Borough, Department of Wildlife Management:  
907-852-0350

**Bering Strait region:**

Alaska Sea Grant Marine Advisory Program:  
1-855-443-2397 / 907-434-1149

Eskimo Walrus Commission:  
1-877-277-4392

Kawerak, Inc.  
907-443-4265

**Yukon-Kuskokwim delta:**

Alaska Sea Grant Marine Advisory Program:  
1-855-443-2397 / 907-434-1149

NOAA Fisheries Alaska Region has set up a webpage with detailed information on the Northern Pinniped UME, which can be found at:

<http://alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/protectedresources/seals/ice/diseased/default.htm>

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